

Trabajo Fin de Grado

George Floyd's Last Breath: The Construction of the Black Body as a Threat

Autora

Andrea Daudén Lafoz

Director

Juan Antonio Tarancón de Francisco

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras/ Grado en Estudios Ingleses
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Resumen

Existe la idea de que Estados Unidos es un país post-racial, sin embargo, los recientes asesinatos policiales de hombres negros desarmados han demostrado lo contrario. La violencia racial de la policía reflejada en el vídeo de la muerte de George Floyd en 2020 desató protestas y disturbios no sólo en Estados Unidos, sino en todo el mundo. El expolicía blanco Derek Chauvin fue declarado culpable por el asesinato de Floyd. En este trabajo analizaremos cómo la brutalidad policial y los estereotipos son principios fundamentales para entender la profunda desigualdad racial en Estados Unidos. Además, explicaremos cómo las pruebas audiovisuales y las protestas son clave para impulsar un cambio.

Palabras clave: George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, estereotipos, racismo, deshumanización, brutalidad policial

Abstract

There is the idea that the United States of America is a post-racial country, however, the recent police killings of unarmed Black men have proven otherwise. The racial violence by police reflected in the video of George Floyd's death in 2020 sparked protests and riots not only in the United States but around the world. Former white police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of Floyd's murder. In this paper we will analyse how police brutality and stereotypes are fundamental principles for understanding the deep racial inequality in the United States. In addition, we will explain how video evidence and protests are key to driving change.

Keywords: George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, stereotypes, racism, dehumanization, police brutality

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1. INTRODUCTION

Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor and now George Floyd. These six names have one thing in common: they were all African-American and all died at the hands of the police. A recent research has found that people of colour are more likely to be killed by police than whites, and that the odds are higher for Black men. In these police encounters, race, age and gender are factors that influence both the perception of the individual and the type of intervention (Edwards et al. 16796). Given this intersection between race and police use of force, we could explain this disparity in deaths as being due to the racial bias of law enforcement. As Jill Nelson concludes, “police brutality toward African Americans and other people of color is, like slavery, part of the birth of this nation” (17). In other words, the mistreatment of this community has its origins in early US history.

The African-American community has undergone a long and arduous fight against racism. Once the slave system was finally abrogated with the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865), other obstacles like the Jim Crow laws or the rise of white-supremacist hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan were placed in the way. In other words, different forms of discrimination were found to hinder the freedom of the African-American community. Nonetheless, all those years of bigotry were always accompanied by resistance through revolts and rebellions. In this case, it is pertinent to mention the Civil Rights Movement, which marked a turning point as it sought equal rights under the law. Some examples of its achievements are the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act (Foner). More recently, special attention is due to the political and social movement Black Lives Matter (BLM) which was born as a hashtag in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had been indicted for the murder of Trayvon Martin. This Black activism, which was soon taken from

social media postings to the streets, became increasingly prominent as a consequence of the subsequent and constant presence of racial violence in a short span of time in the United States. Among these incidents we could highlight in particular the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown and their corresponding trial verdicts (Chase, 1092-1100). From this, it can be inferred that the problem is not only this racism expressed in the form of violence—and even murder—but a larger national problem rooted both in the US criminal and judicial system, and in people's perceptions of the Black community. It is through the grisly case of George Floyd that we see how this fight for an equal and dignified treatment is not yet over.

Another essential point to make about the entrenched racism in this country is related to its presidency. President Donald Trump's (2016-2020) decisions throughout his presidential term reflect the implicit racism, lack of support and interest that his administration has had towards the African-American community. This can be seen, among other things, in the abandonment of the Obama-era police reform efforts. Instead, Trump's administration placed its emphasis on tough-on-crime policies and the militarisation of law enforcement. Thus, encouraging greater freedom in the use of force by the police despite the numerous—and not isolated—cases of killings of people of colour due to lethal force (McManus et al. 1042-1045; Clayton 712-714).

It should come as no surprise, against this historical background, that racial discrimination continues to exist in contemporary US society. Different ways have been found to violate and deny their status as human beings. However, racism is no longer explicitly seen as before, it is rather something implicit in society. On paper, they are all legally equal, but the praxis does not follow the theory. This is where the implicit racial bias comes into play, as there is no existing law that can change people's opinions and attitudes towards race.

In this paper, I will examine contemporary racial bias through the use of stereotypes, a concept developed by the US journalist Walter Lippmann. According to Dyer, “it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve” (par. 3). As to how stereotypes work, Lippmann stresses that they try to give some order to the complexity of reality and therefore the world. Human societies make sense of themselves by simplifying things, which in turn constitute what they are. Stereotypes are also economic, that is, at first glance they are simple, but there is a certain complexity that lies in all the information and connotations they can comprise. Furthermore, stereotypes express the values and beliefs of a social group and the idea of “belonging” to that society (Dyer pars. 1-13). This means that stereotypes naturalize and justify the hegemonic power of one group over another by convincing that the dominant group is better than the other in all possible aspects (Berg 22). We could then conclude that stereotypes reduce something tremendously complex as a human being or a community to a series of ideologically charged traits or characteristics.

As has been noted above, the current perception of Black men has its roots in the history of the United States of America and, despite all the progress that has been made, different forms of racism in the 21st century dehumanize and devalue Black men. Race prejudice has claimed the lives of many, if not thousands, African-American men, women and children. For this reason, in this dissertation I reflect on the current construction of Black men as a potential threat by using the death of George Floyd as a case to study. Floyd’s death as a result of police use of excessive force illustrates the lasting negative perception of African-Americans in the United States; more specifically, it reveals a number of attitudes that deprive African-Americans of humanity and construct them as a threat.

As a means to develop my analysis, in the first section I will provide a general background to the arrest of George Floyd and the subsequent turmoil not only in the country, but also across the globe. It is important to note that the reactions are unprecedented, and some media have even described this event as historic in a society that is no stranger to racially-motivated police abuse (Collenette; Fisher; Waxman), thus exposing the magnitude of the problem. Then, I will discuss the dehumanization of the Black body through stereotypes and misperceptions of Black people. Finally, I will examine police brutality exerted in the arrest of George Floyd, providing information on the excessive use of force resulting from instruction in the US police academy training.

2. REACTIONS TO THE MURDER OF GEORGE FLOYD

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American man, was arrested in Minneapolis for allegedly buying cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Officers handcuffed Floyd and forced him into the squad car despite tearful pleas that he was claustrophobic. This fatal arrest ended with three officers pinning Floyd to the pavement, and police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than 9 minutes. Floyd's repeated cries for help and bystanders' warnings about his breathing difficulties were completely ignored ("How George Floyd Died"). The testimony of the medical examiners who were in charge of the autopsy agree that the main cause of Floyd's death was the pressure exerted on his body by the police officers and, in particular, by Chauvin's dangerous manoeuvre (Arango et al.).

A day after the incident, protests broke out in Minneapolis and the four police officers who were involved in Floyd's arrest (Derek Chauvin, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao) were fired. Mr. Chauvin was eventually arrested and charged with second-degree murder, third-degree murder and second-degree

manslaughter. It is noteworthy to mention that Derek Chauvin considered that his use of force was not excessive but reasonable. What is more, he also has a series of misconduct complaints, and almost none of them led to some form of disciplinary action. On April 20, the ex-officer was found guilty on all three charges, which can lead to a maximum of 40 years in prison. Despite this verdict, the offender could serve much less time due to the sentencing guidelines. Even so, prosecutors have requested a more severe penalty for Chauvin. The other three former police officers were also charged and their trial is still to come. They have also been indicted on civil rights charges for depriving Floyd of his constitutional rights during his detainment (“How George Floyd Died”).

The death of George Floyd was the last straw for a community that has long harboured anger at the incessant instances of racism, injustice and police brutality. As explained above, after the video of the incident captured by one of the witnesses went viral, protests and riots erupted across the country for days if not weeks. The video evidence has been critical for the trial, showing the undeniable atrocity of the murder. However, these images not only sparked an uprising in the United States but, as the news widely spread internationally, people around the world also took to the streets.

The protests over George Floyd’s murder have made the Black Lives Matter movement resonate again, and have given more strength and visibility to a movement that was born in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s murder in 2012. Nationwide reactions, along with those abroad, may be a turning point in US history, as different factors have combined to make these protests reveal the magnitude of the problem. On the one hand, these waves of civil unrest are not only due to the death of George Floyd, but to an entire community that is exhausted by the fact that their skin colour is their death sentence. The death of an African-American due to the abuse of police force—and a

host of entrenched prejudices towards this race—is a story that is repeating itself over and over again. Not only that, but in many of these cases the perpetrators have gotten away with murder, such as Daniel Pantaleo for Eric Garner chokehold death (Cuddy). This clearly exemplifies what Martin Luther King, who advocated for non-violence, once said: “a riot is the language of the unheard” (King). While many protests began and ended peacefully, others became increasingly violent. The rage behind these protests was expressed through disruptive behaviour and destruction of property. Cases of vandalism, lootings or setting fire to the Minneapolis police station are some examples of these violent demonstrations. The authorities responded brutally with the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, imposition of curfews and even arrests as a way to control and disperse the crowds. Another factor is the response of the then president, Donald Trump, who did not try to appease or sympathise with the protests but, in line with his campaign rhetoric of “law and order,” added fuel to the fire. Trump instilled more anger by threatening to deploy military force (Cuddy).

Also of importance is the fact that we can find a greater diversity in the group of protesters. People are also starting to be more aware and showing a greater interest in the situation that the African-American community is facing in the United States. In addition, the power of social media and the greater recognition by the news of these events are also very important factors for the impact of Floyd’s case (Cuddy; “It Really Is Different This Time”). The George Floyd protests reveal a bigger problem. According to Opal Tometi, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, “to think that our fight is solely about civil rights is to misunderstand the fundamental aspirations of this movement. ... It is about the full recognition of our rights as citizens; and it is a battle for full civil, social, political, legal, economic and cultural rights” (par. 4). An atmosphere of frustration and anguish was already pervading the United States due to

the coronavirus pandemic. All this anxiety fuelled these anti-racist demonstrations, which made the socio-economic disparity of the Black population more evident (Cuddy; “It Really Is Different This Time”). Thus, protesters are not only confronting law enforcement, they are addressing social injustice and institutional racism in the United States. Although it is difficult to know whether all this upheaval will bring about major changes, the impact of Floyd’s case might have taken the first step. For the moment, racism in America seems to have become permanently visible and people are increasingly aware that the Black body is still unjustifiably viewed as a potential threat.

3. DEHUMANIZATION OF THE BLACK BODY

In order to understand the treatment of George Floyd by the police on the day of his death, it is first necessary to explain the importance of acknowledging racial bias. To deny that racial discrimination no longer exists in American society would be to ignore a reality. A similar process occurs when someone asserts to be “colour-blind.” The problem with colour-blindness is that not only does it deny systemic racism in the United States, but also erases the identity of people of colour, ignores their realities, history and how they experience day-to-day life. The truth is that race determines everything: job opportunities, income, the neighbourhood you live in, home value, education, and even how people relate to them. If people claim not to “see colour,” why are Blacks overrepresented in the criminal justice system? (Bonilla-Silvia 1-2; Weller pars. 6, 20). Ignoring racial injustice is a (white) privilege that does not make racism disappear.

In his book, Eduardo Bonilla-Silvia describes how colour-blindness is a “new racial ideology ... [that] explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (2). An example of this would be concealing your racial

judgements by basing them on cultural assumptions, such as justifying that African-Americans have fewer opportunities in the labour market not because of the colour of their skin, but because they don't work hard enough (40). Whites create a frame in which society's racial structure is naturalized through non-racial justifications such as the one just mentioned. Colour-blind racism thus functions as a way of masking and upholding institutional racism and racial hierarchy.

Before we focus on stereotypes and their consequences, it is worth clarifying that when studies deal with the perception of the African-American community, they speak of "Black bodies" rather than "Black persons" (Bangura; Embrick; Young). The concept of "Black body" is based on a set of popular and repeated connotations that define our understanding of blackness. In order for this construction to take place, the similarities are taken into account and the differences of these individual bodies are set aside (Young 4, 10). In other words, the Black body is an imagined concept that projects our perception of this race. Harvey Young clarifies that not everyone has the same experience but that there is a "remarkable similarity, a repetition with a difference" (5). The individual becomes "metonymically black" (Young 7) as the physical and the conception of the Black body become one. However, by perceiving the Black person in this way, the subject is already losing his or her individuality. As a result, the Black body determines the Black experience and dehumanizes the Black person; both outcomes are closely connected.

Attitudes or behaviour towards a person depend on how that individual is perceived. That is, we consciously or unconsciously associate stereotypes or characteristics to a person or group of people as in the case of African-Americans. As a consequence, this also conditions how one sees oneself and how one acts. This matter is closely linked to the nation's history, in which the racial structure has been central to

the creation of American society (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow laws). The result of racialization (classifying and ascribing attributes to people for their racial aspect and cultural practice) has been a historical legacy that still influences the economic, political and social system that shapes the United States, and therefore it also affects how that minority is viewed and treated. As a matter of fact, the experiences of Black bodies now are similar to those of the past, where violence always predominate (Owusu-Bempah 4-5; Young 4-5).

Research has found that certain racial stereotypes continue (to a greater or lesser extent) throughout history up to the present day. Black bodies have usually been ascribed as savages, monkeys, apes, or have been associated to animalistic qualities. These stereotypical images did not simply disappear, they evolved to new ones over the course of history. Today, Black bodies are negatively stereotyped as criminals, violent, dangerous, and in need of control (Bangura 2; Embrick 836; Oliver 4-8; Owusu-Bempah 4-6). Such images demonstrate how these bodies have never been considered fully human. Assigning them animal characteristics deprives them of their human condition. Moreover, regarding them as brute criminals also has a decidedly dehumanizing effect, portraying them as somehow uncivilised and therefore less than the advanced white human being. This perception of the Black body rationalizes the harsh mistreatment they receive. As a matter of fact, this situation has been going on since slavery, a legitimate system in which Black bodies were property and therefore had a certain value (Bangura 16). Even if the law in the twenty-first century stipulates otherwise, if they are not regarded as fully human, people will not see them and/or treat them with the same rights. For instance, after Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson, his lifeless body laid unattended in the street for hours (Embrick 837), a disrespectful and degrading treatment. Floyd received the same kind

of demeaning approach when he was arrested: his trousers were pulled down and not pulled up again after the frisk (“RAW”). This clearly shows how Mr. Floyd was not treated with dignity and respect by the authority. Despite the many advances and achievements that African Americans have made, the nation is still deeply rooted in its legacy, causing this community to be viewed, or treated, in dehumanizing ways. The major difference now is that whites consider we are living in a postracial society and justify their racial views in a more covert and subtle manner, relying on culture rather than biology. This is closely related to colour-blindness; as explained above, instead of justifying structural racism due to race, they rationalize it through a series of apparently non-racial mechanisms that blame these minorities for their own position in society.

As previously discussed, the perception of the Black body has varied over the course of history. A compilation of surveys has shown that, since the 1940s, the stereotypical views of African-Americans as “lazy, stupid, irresponsible, and violent” has declined. However, the figures continue to show that a high proportion of the white population has this perception of the Black community (Bonilla-Silva 4). Another study conducted in 2018 found that physical factors such as height provided different perceptions of the subject depending on the colour of your skin. In the case of white men, those who are taller are seen as intelligent, more attractive and competent, while tall Black men are associated with threat, aggressiveness, intimidation and weapons. This physical factor, along with corpulence, lead Black men to be the victims of police profiling without reasonable suspicion (Hester and Gray 2711-2713). In fact, this biased perception of height and weight played a role in the arrest of George Floyd. As we can see in a body camera footage, Derek Chauvin justified his actions to a bystander by saying that he had to control Floyd as he was a “sizable guy” and “probably on something” (“Day 3 Testimony”). This statement shows how Chauvin relied upon racial

stereotypes when he took action during Mr. Floyd's arrest and, therefore, this officer was invoking the image of a dangerous person based on his skin colour and corpulence.

Another essential point in the dehumanization of Blacks is related to the disproportionately representation of African Americans in prison. Given that stereotypes can determine behaviour and performance, Blacks are more likely to be stopped, searched and even arrested on suspicion of having committed a crime. Not only that, but the jury can also be influenced by stereotypes when assessing guilt in a trial (O'Flaherty and Sethi 3-7; Owusu-Bempah 2). In the same way, Blacks are also more likely to experience police violence because they are prone to be (mis)recognized as delinquent and aggressive (Oliver 3; Owusu-Bempah 2). We can add that territories can also be subject to processes of racialization and stereotyping, such as ghettos. These slums are characterized by their intention towards racial segregation and are often associated with high levels of poverty and therefore higher levels of crime and danger. Consequently, the use of force by the police is also higher in these areas (O'Flaherty and Sethi 26-27; Owusu-Bempah 4-5). It is also worth noting that another result of urban spatial segregation is that it fosters the subordination and domination of the Black minority group. The ghetto has become "an endemic intersection of race and class in the USA" and "an important tool for isolating the byproducts of racial oppression—crime, violence, drugs, poverty, and despair" (Owusu-Bempah 5). Thus, racial profiling, police brutality and structural inequality are intimately dictated by Black identity and stereotypes in the United States.

In a chapter in their book on the role of stereotypes, O'Flaherty and Sethi observe how implicit associations between Black suspects and weapons can distort the actions of police officers when they are required to take a rapid response. The results of the experiments showed that Blacks, despite being unarmed or holding harmless

objects, are more likely to be perceived as carrying some kind of weapon or dangerous object. Therefore, the police response will be different because of the “dangerousness” of the situation. In these simulations, unarmed suspects were more likely to be erroneously shot by police officers if they were Black, while armed whites were more likely not to be shot. Furthermore, they noticed that being aware of a stereotype such as that of African Americans being associated with violence was also a simple contributing factor that contributed to this “shooting bias” (18-19). Having established this idea, one wonders if negative stereotypes of African-Americans were a determining factor when Thomas Lane, one of the officers involved in Floyd’s case, immediately drew his gun and pointed it at Floyd, who was terrified and begging not to be shot (“RAW”). With all of the above, it would not be hard to believe that Lane and all his colleagues were driven by his subjective perceptions of the Black community. In fact, it would not be the first time that a white man has been driven by his racial prejudices, whether or not they are shared by the general public. Trayvon Martin was negatively stereotyped when Zimmerman decided to shoot him. The crime Trayvon Martin had committed? Wearing a hoodie, being in a community where Martin did not appear to “belong,” and above all, being Black, was enough for Zimmerman to assume Martin was a potential criminal. The perpetrator claimed to have acted in self-defence, fearing for his life, and at trial, Zimmerman was acquitted (Bangura 5; O’Flaherty and Sethi 34-36).

A final essential point to mention that contributes to the creation and consolidation of stereotypical perceptions of African Americans is media portrayals. Minorities are depicted in the media as uncontrollable and dangerous criminals. Television news and “reality”-based programmes (Oliver 5) along with the distortion of images and language (Embrick 839) are the two main factors to be studied, as they tend to overrepresent whites as innocent victims and Black men as suspects of criminal

activities. Additional studies showed how white individuals who tend to be exposed to this type of content manifest greater racism. The authors of the research suggested that because these viewers likely already had racialized perceptions of crime, exposure to media depictions of criminal acts simply increased their racism. Regardless of exposure time, viewers may come to perceive reality in a similar way to how it has been reflected in the media. In addition, African-Americans are also portrayed as particularly violent, aggressive and guilty. They are therefore perceived as criminals to be controlled, justifying and even legitimating the excessive use of force by the police (Embrick 839; Oliver 5-14). As already explained above, an officer's perception of the target and the dangerousness of the situation will determine the type of action and approach he or she takes. The problem is that, as has been shown, in many cases police encounters with African-Americans are influenced by stereotypes, regardless of whether they are implicit or explicit, or whether the officer is aware of or endorse them. It is true that George Floyd has not been portrayed negatively in the media, but as this is a common occurrence, the consequences have been visible in his case. Considering these racially-biased portrayals in the media, we can conclude that Floyd's death recorded on video by witnesses is a key piece of evidence because it shows things as they happened, leaving little room for manipulation of the truth.

In conclusion, we could contend that George Floyd's death is largely due to the African-American community's predisposition to excessive and even, in this case, lethal use of police force. To explain this, the history of the nation should not be overlooked, as the situation in which this group finds itself is rooted in the birth of this country. We have seen how stereotypes have not disappeared but have simply evolved and adapted to the context in which they find themselves. The demonization and criminalization of the Black community severely damages the lives of these individuals, from

psychological harm to physical harm or even death. There is an existing process of dehumanization too, as this homogenous perception of African Americans erases individual identity. Finally, colour-blindness has led to the idea that there is a “post-racial” America, but this is just a utopia that only privileged whites can afford to believe. Meanwhile, Blacks continue to live in a systemic and institutional racist society.

4. POLICE BRUTALITY

The African-American community is more likely to be the victim of extreme police violence in the United States than white people (O’Flaherty and Sethi 129). As with stereotypes, to understand the current situation, it is essential to take a look at history. As early as the era of slavery, the forces of law and order were responsible for the domination and control of Black slaves. The end of this system did not mean that the abuse of the law ceased to negatively affect the lives of people of colour, since the freedom of these individuals was considered a greater threat to white citizens (Bell 92). This resulted in a legacy of racism and bias that is still present today. The police force is supposed to be there to protect *all* citizens of the nation. However, there is a “racial reductionism” in which race and crime is related to Blacks (or Latinos), but not whites. And when it comes to police brutality, the victim is typically a person of colour. This outcome is due to the disproportionate number of Blacks (and Latinos) who have been the target of police assaults (Russell 136-137). In fact, the recurring incidents of police violence across the country against African-Americans are evidence of how this should be regarded as a national concern. We can conclude that not only the police force, but also the US government, has and is failing to protect non-white citizens, especially Black Americans.

While we know the number of police officers killed on duty, there is no accurate and reliable data that can give the exact number of civilians who have been killed by the police (O’Flaherty and Sethi 123; Hattery and Smith 162; Zimring 16-17). This is due to the lack of visibility and, therefore, disinterest in keeping a tedious record of the deaths and conducting a thorough investigation of these violent incidents. When it comes to Black-related issues, history has proven to be apathetic (Russell 138). Nonetheless, we can get a rough idea thanks to all the information that the media and newspapers have gathered from these incidents. It has been shown that Black men are far more likely to have encounters of any kind with police officers. For example, unarmed Black men are shot and killed 2.5 times more often by police than are white men (Hattery and Smith 168). Another instance of racially biased policing is the mass criminalization of African-Americans (and Latinos). Based on the stereotype that Blacks are more involved in criminal acts, the police show greater suspicion. As a result, they are more likely to be stopped by the police and often suffer police harassment. The problem with this evidence-free reasoning is that it naturalizes police officers to racially profile and assault Black men based on their mistrust towards this community (Russell 138-139, 144). This should be addressed as a serious issue rather than ignoring the fact that police killings are related to racial profiling, explicit and implicit bias or, in general, racism. According to Franklin E. Zimring, all this changed in 2015, a year after the shooting of Michael Brown. From that moment on, the police use of excessive force ceased to be the result of a singular and isolated incident, and came to be considered a nationwide civil-rights matter (3).

The death of Black 18-year-old Michael Brown and the jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot him, demonstrated that public action and visibility are crucial to exposing the racialization of police brutality and promoting

change. This incident triggered protests and riots never seen before throughout the country. Brown's case attracted extensive media attention, which proved to be a major factor in raising national public awareness of these police killings. Before Brown, however, media coverage was quite limited (Zimring 3-11). In his book *When Police Kill*, Franklin E. Zimring explains that "the political disaggregation of the units of government that are responsible for police and their control means each event is far removed from the levels of government that most people relate to when considering national problems" (10). Simply put, the previous low visibility was the result of disassociating the national government from police violence. If these incidents are not addressed as something that should concern the entire nation, people will perceive them as individual, unrelated episodes and not as a larger problem. Thus, Brown shooting triggered two major changes in the United States. On the one hand, police use of lethal force became a national question affecting civil rights and, on the other, these stories were seen as recurring and related to each other. His death began to be linked to those of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddy Gray and others (Zimring 15-16). Zimring concludes that the attention paid to excessive police force in 2014 and 2015 may have marked an important shift generating greater interest in addressing this matter in the future (12). Likewise, the emotional impact of Floyd's death immediately brought people out into the streets, and protests spread around the world. The aftermath has had such a social awakening that we can see how raising our voices can bring about significant change. Derek Chauvin, the police officer who killed Floyd, was found guilty on all three charges. Although it is too early to tell, this case seems to have inspired a change.

It is also important to mention the role of visual evidence in relation to police brutality, especially in light of the George Floyd case. Often, videos showing deaths or assaults on the Black community by police officers have gone viral. This phenomenon

is another way of broadening the problem, and giving great visibility and attention to the excessive police use of force in a country whose system is racialized. The circulation of such videos has led to large protests. An example of this is the beating of Rodney King captured on video in 1991 (Zimring 202-213). As we have already explained when introducing the killing of George Floyd, the videos recorded by the bystanders of his death spread at the speed of light and triggered major reactions worldwide. In addition, it has been seen that many police shootings or infractions do not end with any type of disciplinary procedure, reprimand or sanction. This reminds us that Derek Chauvin received several misconduct complaints of which almost none resulted in disciplinary action. Consequently, it has been observed that monitoring officer activity through cameras that police departments place on uniforms or in police cars is one way in which police-community encounters and officer conduct can be assessed (Zimring 210-218). Nevertheless, as we will explain below, police officers are often protected by law based on the basis preemptive action, which allows them greater freedom to use lethal force with impunity.

To further understand deadly violence and why it occurs, we need to put the focus on the militarization of the police and the warrior mentality. With respect to the former, Trump's administration is key. When Donald Trump was in office, he showed his interest in overprotecting and strengthening police forces with more weapons through certain executive decisions. Whereas Obama promoted several police reforms to keep them oversight, Trump defended and assured the protection of police officers as much as he could. For example, he reversed Obama's policy limiting US military surplus equipment to police departments. During his presidency, Obama had ordered this restriction after the fatal militarized response to the Ferguson uprisings over the shooting of Michael Brown. Furthermore, Trump's lack of engagement on discussing

and solving racial discrimination and police violence has resulted in an increasing distrust among citizens of colour (McManus et al. 1041-1054). In short, Trump's presidency has clearly confirmed that systemic racism is present in the United States, where his call for "law and order" is actually an all-white campaign.

The militarization of the police department is not just about weaponry, it is also about the way of thinking. In his article, the professor of law and former officer Seth Stoughton states that "officers are trained to cultivate a 'warrior mindset'" (225). This "warrior cop" training leads to more problems despite being well-intentioned. This mentality is associated with the militarization of the police because the officer follows a mental training similar to that of a soldier. The academy teaches police recruits that they have to be determined and persistent agents who are prepared to overcome any obstacle or adversity. The "police warrior" is in constant contact with life-threatening situations, so his main goal is to survive and make it home alive every day. However, this instils in police officers the fear that death is always lurking. This approach to the world leads them to consider every situation and individual as a threat without exception. Consequently, interactions with police officers can often escalate to potentially violent conflicts as these officers are on the defensive, thinking that this is already a dangerous confrontation (Stoughton 225-229; Hattery and Smith 164). For these warrior-minded officers, "the people with whom officers interact must accede, respecting officers' authority by doing what they are told. The failure to comply is confirmation that the individual is an enemy for the Warrior to vanquish, physically if necessary" (Stoughton 230). Even so, sometimes the victims of these fatal encounters do not respond out of disrespect for authority or because they are up to no good, sometimes those responses are motivated by fear of possible deadly outcomes. This was the case of Floyd. George Floyd was already apologizing without even knowing what he had done, and in a

moment of vulnerability he burst into tears. He had just lost his mother, his job, and had tested positive for coronavirus. He repeated in tears “please don’t shoot me, please, man” (“RAW”), a reasonable reaction considering the numerous police shootings of Black men. Neither Derek Chauvin when he pressed his knee to Floyd’s neck while he cried “I can’t breathe,” nor Thomas Lane when he forced Floyd out of the car at gunpoint, nor any of the cops when they forced Floyd into the police car despite saying he was claustrophobic, none of them flinched or showed an ounce of humanity. These cops only saw a Black body that they had to restrain, even though there was no resistance to the arrest. As a solution to the “warrior” concept, it is suggested that police officers move to a “guardian” mentality. The guardian policing shows a greater willingness for communication, cooperation and legitimacy rather than approaching every citizen as a potential enemy. Tactical interactions are preferred when violence is avoidable (Stoughton 230-232). If the officers involved in Floyd’s arrest had been more forthcoming, if they had really listened to Floyd, if they had seen that, first and foremost, he was a human being, perhaps the outcome would have been different.

Finally, a combination of the legacy of history, police militarization and the warrior mentality authorize police to kill without retaliation. And it is the strong protests and powerful uprisings of the population, reinforced by visual evidence, that may eventually help to bring justice. Throughout history, the lives of African Americans have been taken away and the perpetrators have been exempted from punishment (O’Flaherty and Sethi 64; Bell 90). If a Black person murdered a white person, the offender was sentenced more harshly than if a white murdered a Black. It has been observed that this situation continues to occur today. If we review the history of the United States, we can see how much racial progress has taken place and yet how little has changed (O’Flaherty and Sethi 64-67; Bell 92-93). As for police killings of

(unarmed) Black men, impunity is simply a byproduct of a society that has always viewed the Black body as expendable. White police officers are “doubly consigned with power as they are White and they are acting as agents of the criminal justice system” (Bangura 9). In fact, they are entitled to qualified immunity when they apply lethal force if they believe the situation requires it. This preemptive motive has serious effects since knowing that you can kill someone without being brought to justice increases the victim’s fear and the likelihood of this violent ending (O’Flaherty and Sethi 63-71; Hattery and Smith 160).

Racial bias also plays a role in this issue. African-Americans are perceived as dangerous criminals who only know to respond with brutality. Therefore, Blacks are perceived as a threat even if they are unarmed. The victim, aware of these stereotypes, may react negatively (offended and indignant), or carefully to avoid being perceived as provocative (O’Flaherty and Sethi 110-119). For example, as we have already pointed out, Floyd’s reaction was conditioned by fear. He was already aware that many encounters between Blacks and cops often end fatally. Police officers’ decisions, too, are conditioned by these entrenched prejudices, whether they actually support them or not. As a result, they kill with impunity on the premise that it was an act of self-defence (Hattery and Smith 160; O’Flaherty and Sethi 110-119). For example, Terence Crutcher or Philando Castile were shot to death because the police officers believed they were going to draw a gun, and therefore feared for their life. Both officers were acquitted (Hattery and Smith 160-161). We can conclude that the frequency with which African Americans have been killed by police and the frequency with which these perpetrators have not face serious consequences (Bell 90-92; Embrick 837-838) demonstrates how racial disparity pervades not only the criminal justice system but nearly every aspect of American life. There will always be an excuse that will condone police deadly violence

toward Black bodies. Although legal justice has been served in the case of George Floyd's death as Derek Chauvin has been found guilty of all charges against him for the murder, this "victory" has been the exception to the rule if we look at the numerous cases that do not go to trial, and of those few that do, almost none of the officers are convicted.

5. CONCLUSION

The evidence provided in this research paper has shown that the United States is far from being a post-racial society. This modern nation was built on the hard work of enslaved Blacks. Although the situation in the 21st century has changed radically, it is not surprising that the legacy of slavery lingers in this country. The life and identity of African Americans have always been determined by their racial identity; the colour of their skin dictates who they are. This has never been the case for whites. A glaring proof of this internalized racism in the country is the failure of the glorified police force in protecting the Black community. The frequent killings of (unarmed) Blacks at the hands of the police have revealed troubling patterns of America's long history of violence against Black people.

The dehumanization of African Americans is carried out primarily through stereotypes and generalizations that have detrimental consequences. They lead to discrimination and erase the individuality of members of the African American community by treating and considering them all the same. Racial prejudices do not disappear, but rather change and evolve over time. Currently, the Black man is seen as a potential criminal who, by his physical appearance, proves to be dangerous, brutish and threatening. This plays an important role in the abuse of police authority and racial profiling. This discriminatory practice has shown an increase in encounters between

Blacks and police officers. In addition, the police academy prepares its recruits with a “warrior” mentality, whose warlike worldview makes them perceive every situation they may face as a threat. Their main objective is survival rather than protecting and serving all citizens as dictated by the “guardian” mentality. Furthermore, visual proof and especially the power of protests have proven to be significant factors in promoting change. As evidence, we have considered the terrible death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The release of the video of Floyd pinned to the ground, screaming “I can’t breathe” before finally losing consciousness, sparked a worldwide movement both in the streets and in social media. These powerful multiracial rebellions put the spotlight on the racialized US system. Floyd’s death was cruel, cold and unhuman, but above all, unjustified. The arrest procedure did not fit the crime of allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill. The police reaction to the situation was disproportionate. Thanks to the body camera footage where we see the fatal encounter from beginning to end, we can confirm that Floyd showed no resistance or aggressiveness during the arrest. Floyd was not potentially dangerous, rather he was helpless, consumed by fear and the emotional instability of his personal situation. One thing is clear, history has shown that when minorities make their voices heard, great changes can take place. Although it is too early to tell, we can hope that Floyd’s case has shaped the future of social justice. This is not the end of the story; justice has been served but the fight for racial equality continues every day.

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